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Behind the Stitches: the Fabric of Nebraska

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Homestead National Monument

Behind the Stitches: the Fabric of Nebraska by Elizabeth Ingraham

(Gallery reading on June 3, 2017 at the International Quilt Study Center & Museum, Lincoln, Nebraska, in connection with the exhibition, *Regarding Nebraska*)

Disclaimer: Before I became an artist I was a lawyer and that is why I feel compelled to have this disclaimer, which is that first, this is not the traditional gallery talk. Secondly, there is some poetry in this exchange and poetry can be problematic but if you think of poetry as something multileveled that elicits a pang of emotion or recognition or delight then it isn't much different from visual art.

When the museum asked me to do a reading, I was intrigued. I'm a sculptor and I work with cloth. Cloth is expressive and the process is satisfying and cloth is a material that brings us back to the human body, human labor and human touch, common concerns in all my work. But as a sculptor I also work with anything that exists in space and time, including words and language. Words are another material for me and my work often begins in writing and uses text in some way.

So as a lover of language I looked up the word "reading," which is both a noun and a verb and which means not just the act of reading but also uttering aloud, learning from what one has seen or found, comprehending, interpreting and even foretelling and predicting. That seemed broad enough for what I want to do here, which is talk a little about why I made the work that's here, and about what's behind the stitches for me, as I've been making a fabric called Nebraska.

My notes for this reading were: *the cradle | the grasses the water the beauty | the loss the fragility the resilience | the fear the faith*. That seems like a good list so I'll dig in.

| the cradle |

There's a poet you probably don't know, and you should, named Michael Hannon and this is one of his poems:

Between heaven and earth I write one line.
Sometimes another line follows:
ambitious legions singing their way nowhere,
or ordinary messengers carried deeper into human life
by the music and its woman stepping out of her clothes,
to the heartbeat of what comes next, what goes on for its own sake.
The page after the last page, on which we do not appear.
("Ordinary Messengers")

The title is "Ordinary Messengers" and that's what I am as an artist, an ordinary messenger, giving form and voice to lived experience.



Prairie Skin



Prairie Skin (detail)



Locator Map, Section 035

Long ago an artist told me how some nomadic tribal peoples would weave rugs for the cradles they carried on their backs and how they also used these cradles as shrouds, their way of acknowledging the probability these infants would die. I admire this type of portability and I respect the cold clarity in this economy. And if you've seen these types of woven rugs you know how beautiful they are. So that is how I came to think of the Prairie Skin as multifunctional—as a covering for a human, as a shelter, as protection, as a shroud, but also as something decorative and celebratory as well.

The genesis of Prairie Skin also comes from my 9,000 miles of travel across Nebraska, on state roads, on county roads, on no road. I began to consider the prairie (and I use the word “prairie” as “grasslands” and in particular as the grasslands of the Great Plains in the heart of our continent and as a shorthand for our state)—and I began to consider the prairie as a skin. I've worked with “skin” as a concept before and I came back to it in all its meanings—covering, barrier, protection and permeability. And I also came back to the idea of skin as surface connection—the sense I have that we could lift one edge and peel back the whole state--grasses, rivers, roads, towns.

The constant renewal of skin also reminded me of these grasslands, of their ability to endure, with more life below the surface, in their root systems, than above. I wanted the Prairie Skin I made to be sturdy and enduring. And I wanted this Prairie Skin to have the protective qualities of these grasslands. That protection, for me, included memory and dream and commentary and comfort so I incorporated hand-written text as an interior and hidden layer that could inspire, could insulate and could console. This interior layer gives us essential information to carry with us.

This brings me to:

| the grasses, the water, the beauty |

Because, for me, beauty is part of this essential information.

Here is another poem by Michael Hannon, which reads, in its entirety: “Already been here and gone, / just the tops of the grass bending” (“Angels”).

And that poem sums up for me the beauty of the prairie—the power of that gesture, but also its impermanence. Here. And gone.

The Homestead National Monument was one of my first stops in my travels and I couldn't believe the sound—the insects, the birds, the rustling of grasses in the wind. I was surprised by so much life and I stood and listened to the prairie for a long time.

When I was drawing my Locator Map and got to Section 35 it had too many lakes to count. It looked porous. How can this be? I wondered. What does this look like on the ground? When I drove to Crescent Lake National Wildlife Refuge, in Section 35, the gravel road narrowed to a path and it was like driving through an ocean of grass. When I saw the first of an endless series of blue lakes, my heart stood still. I felt changed by this beauty.

It was the grasses and the water that stayed with me most insistently after my travels in Nebraska and that's what I focused on in the quilted



Crescent Lake National Wildlife Refuge



Island Lake, Section 35



Section 055, Grand Island



Section 055, Grand Island (back)



Toadstool Geologic Park

terrain squares. I would remember the action of the wind on the surface of the water. I would remember the delicate blues as I stitched the lakes and rivers. I would remember the solitude and the sounds and these memories became the ghost grasses and ghost rivers on the reverse side of these quilted squares.

For me, recalling this beauty and re-creating it in other forms is my way of revering it. I translate a small fraction of the experience of air and sky and water and grass and sound. I acknowledge the necessity of beauty, how it nourishes me.

That brings us to:

| the loss, the fragility the resilience |

The more I traveled the more I became aware of gaps and absences, of droughts and deaths and disappearances—towns and grass and water. Here. And gone.

Was my experience of grassland going to be confined to some kind of prairie “zoo” I wondered? To parks and refuges and monuments to a disappearing prairie?

And what about the human presence? Was it the tenth? Or the fiftieth? town whose boarded-up main street made me feel helplessly sad and reminded me that beauty isn’t always pretty. The sun-bleached colors and weathered bricks and ancient graphics of empty buildings in empty towns form a perfect composition but are inextricable from the hard truth of loss.

“A dream of tenderness / wrestles with all I know of history,” writes the poet Adrienne Rich (“From An Old House in America”).

In my work, a dream of possibility wrestles with my suspicion of irreparable loss, wrestles with my suspicion that there are some things wrong with the world that we may no longer be able to make right.

At the same time, I have only to look at the grasses—their fragility but also their resilience—to find solace. How long have they held to this landscape? For thousands upon thousands of years, out of their origin as a sea.

I contrast the wildness of the grasses with the grid of the map and with the grid of the Prairie Skin exterior. These lines and boundaries reflect the history of human occupation, its divisions and borders. There is cost as well as benefit in this occupation, in the transformation of landscape into property.

The cultural geographer John Brinkerhoff Jackson wrote: “Landscape is history made visible . . . lines on a map drawn by war” (Landscape in Sight).

We have wars with nature, wars with others, wars with systems, wars with ourselves. And the consequence is that we have failed in some fundamental ways. We can look at Nebraska's statehood and see evidence of one of those failures. Even though our territory outlawed slavery, it limited the vote to “free white males” and that delayed our admission to the Union. So there is exclusion and discrimination as well as inclusion and tolerance in our own history as a state.

This brings me to:

| the fear, the faith |

We live in perilous times. It's easy to be afraid, and our fear can silence us and keep us isolated. Our fear masks our essential equality and feeds the very forces that then, in turn, fuel our fear.

This is not ideology, this is clarity. It is only human to long for justice, for integrity, for intimacy, for happiness. And we are human.

"Work with words cannot save us," writes Michael Hannon. "Nothing can do that / but perhaps to be saved is not salvation ("Trees").

I'm not looking for salvation. But I am grateful for solace. And I can be persistent, like the grasses. I can be resilient. And I can hope for courage.

Adrienne Rich writes that:

"The tests I need to pass are prescribed by the spirits / of place who understand travel but not amnesia," writes Adrienne Rich ("The Spirit of Place"). She inspired me to both to travel and admonished me to remember. And so I have traveled and recorded that travel through stitch.

Through 9,000 miles of travel and more miles of stitches, through 95 sections of a hand-drawn map—in my art life, in my ordinary life—what sustains me? Not amnesia. Not inattention. Not disregard.

It is making that sustains me, and the attention and regard that goes with making. I value this making, this industry. It frees my mind to make connections, it helps me empathize with the world and things outside myself. It opens my heart to possibilities, to hope. It makes me happy.

"My heart is moved by all I cannot save," the poet Adrienne Rich writes:

so much has been destroyed
I have to cast my lot with those
who age after age, perversely,
with no extraordinary power,
reconstitute the world. ("Natural Resources")

With my making, I reconstitute the world. I honor absence and what's lost, I celebrate beauty and what remains and I make landscape into "place."

This making brings me full circle, to the end of this reading and to the title of this exhibition, *Regarding Nebraska*. I chose the word "regarding" with intention, because of its multiple meanings of "survey, value, care for, attend to, sense, examine, and discern." So in my making, in my stitching, I am regarding Nebraska—trying to survey it, examine it, attend to it, care for it, value it and learn from it.



Platte River State Park



Gordon, Section 009



CR 79 N to Potter, Section 062



Hay Springs, Section 010

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